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SUBJECT: TAJIKS SUPPORT FIBER OPTICS CONFERENCE, BUT WANT "EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES" FOR STATE OPERATOR

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¶1. (SBU) Tajikistan supports the idea of a U.S.-organized conference on regional fiber optic projects (reftel), but Minister of Transportation and Communications Adburahim Ashurov expressed greater interest in more international assistance to support the state-owned operator Tojiktelecom. Ashurov encouraged the development of a regional fiber optics network to create additional opportunities for Tajikistan as a transit country and asked for an official letter laying out the project.

¶2. (SBU) In a May 21 meeting with EmbOffs, Ashurov asked for more technical assistance and training for telecom specialists at Tojiktelecom. Ashurov wants to protect the national company by providing it with international assistance and possible infrastructure investment. He noted that although Tojiktelecom owns all the existing landlines and telecom infrastructure in Tajikistan, a lack of financial resources and lack of market transparency make the company uncompetitive on the local market. Ashurov and Tojiktelecom head Rahmonali Hasanov criticized the 13 mobile phone operators for "filling their pockets and cheating clients" with confusing tariff plans, while failing to expand to rural areas. Ashurov argued that the government, not the private operators should be setting tariffs.

¶3. (SBU) Ashurov acknowledged that in his first six months heading the communications ministry, he has sought out specialists to work on regulatory issues, but the sector still does not have the proper regulation or enough technical experts.

(Note: As the former Minister of Transportation, he was appointed head of the combined ministry in December 2006. End note.) He appreciated his staff's inclusion in an April U.S. Trade and Development Agency forum on regulation in Almaty, and promised that an outstanding letter requesting technical assistance was still in the works, but he wanted to expand the scope of the request beyond regulation to all aspects of telecom.

¶4. (SBU) Leading telecom companies in Tajikistan support the fiber optics but have told EmbOffs that there are technical and policy issues to be resolved first. Chinese companies have already been actively engaged with Bablion and Tojiktelecom on ways to link Tajikistan to the rest of the world without relying on routes through Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Bringing Tajikistan fully on board with a regional fiber optic project will require a great deal of education and technical assistance, both to the government and private operators. Ashurov and other Tajik officials will have to overcome their instincts to protect the uncompetitive

state-owned Tojiktelecom and instead learn to promote private operators -- who in fact pay more tax revenues to the government than any other industry. End Comment.

JACOBSON